

February 13, 2006- Rep. Rahall Delivers Comments At Congressional Forum On Mine Safety And Health

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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) delivered the following remarks at the Congressional Forum on Mine Safety and Health with Miners and Miners' Families today:

Good morning and a special welcome to those of you who traveled through perhaps some treacherous conditions to be with us today in the Nation's Capitol. That in of itself is testimony to your dedication to the cause of improving coal mine safety.

I would also like to thank my colleagues for attending, especially George Miller, the Ranking Democratic Member on the Education and Workforce Committee, for sponsoring this forum.

Coal mining and the safety of our miners are matters that have received too little notice by the Federal government for far too long. It is shameful that it has taken the recent loss of 19 miners - 16 of them from my State, four from my Congressional District - to finally bring the overdue attention of the Administration to this issue.

In the wake of these fatalities it is tragic that the Administration still is dragging its feet on essential mine safety reforms. It is, however, a sad and recurring reality that action to address the plight of the coal miner has historically come about almost solely as a result of tragedy.

For those of you who do not know me, I grew up in the coalfields of southern West Virginia. I have lived among miners all my life. I have stood on the picket lines when armed, helmeted mercenaries were called in to intimidate miners legally expressing their grievances. And during my tenure in the Congress I have been a consistent champion for coal miner health and safety issues.

Few things have so deeply touched me than my battle on behalf of those who suffer from the crippling effects of black lung disease. Legislation I sponsored several years ago became a roadmap for the Clinton Administration's issuance of new regulations aimed at giving these victims a better chance at obtaining justified benefits.

And it was not too long ago that I stood on the floor of the House of Representatives with an amendment to halt the Bush Administration's attempt to issue a rule that would have resulted in a four-fold increase in respirable dust in underground coal mines. At the end of the 15-minute vote I had won that amendment. But as has been the case in many

instances under the Republican House Leadership, the vote was held open and arms were twisted, resulting in the amendment failing by two votes.

I am proud that every single Democrat voted with me. I am still horrified that the House of Representatives went on record as supporting an increase in dust levels in the mines. Thankfully, the amendment was taken up in the Senate, championed by Senators Specter and Byrd, and in the face of mounting hue and cry the Administration backed off that ill-conceived proposal.

And throughout this fight, the United Mine Workers of America and President Cecil Roberts stood with us. I want to publicly thank him and the union for that, and for what they do each and every day.

Shortly after the Sago mine disaster last month I was in Logan County, with the families of Don Bragg and Ellery Hatfield. We spent many long, emotional hours together, praying and hoping. In the end our worst fears were confirmed. It was a wrenching experience that will remain a part of me forever. Then, on the very day the West Virginia Congressional Delegation introduced coal mine safety reform legislation, two more miners - Paul Moss and Edmund Vance - perished in separate accidents in Boone County. It has been one long, harrowing nightmare in West Virginia.

In these last few weeks, I have been asked numerous times to explain what coal mining means to my State. It is hard to convey in few words, because coal touches so many aspects of our lives. Mining has shaped our heritage, our character, and our values.

I wish that it were possible to have my colleagues come to West Virginia, to see my State and the very special place that I represent, the Third Congressional District.

I would love for them to come into the mines and look into the eyes of more dedicated, hardworking miners and experience the conditions under which they work. I would love for them to come with me to meet their families and sit at their supper tables, and hear the stories of generations of miners before them. It would be enlightening.

But if the Members can't go to the Mountains, the Mountains must come to the Members.

So I again thank all of you who have traveled to be with us this morning from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Alabama and even from Canada.

To those who just recently lost their loved ones, I know you are hurting, but I am certain that your husbands loved you very much and would be very proud of you today. I know I am.

Let your voices be heard.

From this room in the Nation's Capitol, let it be heard.

Let it ring out like a Siren's Call, out among the coalfields of our country, in the boardrooms of the corporations, from coast-to-coast of this great Nation of ours, let it be heard. Hear us now, those in the Administration, Hear us now, those in the Congress.

Listen to the voice of the people, those who know this issue best, as they speak from the heart, and from knowledge, to improve the lot of true patriots, our coal miners.

Thank you.